

FURTHEST ECOLOGY

Adam Fagin



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POEMS

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FURTHEST ECOLOGY

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POEMS

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*If one could establish
an absolute power
of silence over oneself*

—Lorine Niedecker

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SOLE INHABITANT

In 1896, Abbott Thayer, American painter and amateur naturalist, described the principle of countershading, “Thayer’s Law,” which said that an animal’s coloring, dark on top and light underneath, distributed shadow equally across the body, making it appear flat and concealing it from predators. Thayer published a book on his discoveries, *Concealing-Coloration in the Animal Kingdom*. Its concepts would form the blueprint for military camouflage during WWI, earning Thayer his nickname, “the father of camouflage.”

In 1910, the artist gave a lecture to a group of “doubting ornithologists” at the Smithsonian Institution. He showed that a hummingbird, when placed in a bush and seen from a pronghorn’s perspective, as skylight merged with its white tail, produced an effect of visual “obliteration.” When Thayer requested the group lie down to observe the hummingbird from the pronghorn’s vantage point, they unanimously refused.

“I have been left alone in the world to point this out,” wrote Thayer. His drafts and letters are homiletic journeys in which existential inquiry meets sketch of Satyr butterfly and bamboo moth. Transcribing glimpses of a nighthawk’s wing, Thayer’s language erupts on the page, revealing a mind in pursuit of what the artist considered a revolutionary vision of the natural world. “I bring evidence of concealing power,” one page reads in its entirety, “no course open but to investigate.”



(obliterate by coalescence)

LUSH MINIMALISMS

broken

light

broken

light

clearing

broken

light

crossing

openfield

blue-gray

light

entering

my

field

of vision

trading

sweetgrass

with

evening

light

I look

away

as indigo

foreshadows

violet

dark tipped whether

flowering gust

crossing parenthetical twilight

a minimal sky listens

with collapsed reverence

it listens in configurations

of silence interior to time

image line and frame

FIRST DREAM OF COLOR

I have learned

all light comes

down through the

motion of the observer.

It is only to the still

observer that the mo-

tion of the observed

form adds revelation.

To a motionless man,

any branch or leaf seems

the same bright

shore.

*

A first sight be-
comes, when time
is visible, wholly
outside color. I enter
the animal, sucking
motion from the leaf-
like shadow of its wing.
Its true outline en-
masse axis of fleshy
processes—"bird" being
a mistranslation of its
environment—pure leafy
space threads twilight
with thumb
and forefinger.

*

Dear northern region, dear dear one:
We hold these truths to be self-evident,
but they're merely exposed.
Meaning tumbles over green leaves.
Aix sponsa ascend a learned vacuity.
Detaching its velocity from hypertelic
rhythms of a redpoll,
a parched grammar tills the soil.

*

This is not a theory.

The sky is blue and there are tree-shadows on snow. It wings,
little white idylls, occupy a point further in. Here a straight line
extends the gaze. It's another blackbird heard across the range.
When reversed it's turned to evidence: I open the impression—
blue kite cut apart by moon-fragment—and am met by observation:
a flight where matter converges with its style of conveyance.

*

A leaf, a nest,

a web, a cry.

In this moment thought

multiplies the animal it becomes.

The sun makes total what it touches.

But only the artist can do this in total darkness.

FUGITIVE DEPTH

I inherit the thereness of the frame
a series of dislocations centerless
journeys and dead-ends through
which I look “for what is looking”
or watch my vision flicker between
internal horizon and ghost-
semantic shore

if I've seen something it
isn't something but *is* that
grows green in silvery sun I
want form to account for image
and perception's fluid entanglements
to force it to "Burst like a stream /
making a world how large do you
think it is / and how far?"

can I portray this process as
temporal vanishing point can
I sidestep its concentric geography—
erased from sight but not from
consequence as some are cast
into corporeal surface of a gaze
called *splay pastoral*
called *morphological ravine*

Watcher, it is inference

I search through:

robin's egg, green shade.

Perspective is divine

malfunction.

Form is an angle

of noon

protruding

through a stalemate

of palette and

circumference.

T'S LAW

If among the waxwing's flight, I describe unbroken light, I describe water among the sleep of birds. A wingbeat governing swift fluidities of form. Dear precious, dear dearest: Here I seize on a sea a pure white vessel's breaking. Over many days mistaken for a cloud, a man's eye creeps up the branches, eats the gray buds. He thinks of white as his sun at night. Has he ever thought his impressions are born? Pouring his confinement through a moon's milk stare, first daylight drains this strange bird: attention residing in a nexus of recurrence. Old ideas that cause the mind to live among bright objects—but only as a means of concealment. Each glance is a distance I simulate. When I require a political economy, I look directly at the sun. Sucked through September's pulse, a solar hinge no hand can touch, sound ascends daylight. The eye is made aware. The boundary is birdsong filled with ghostly listening. Or the color of the sea approaching the clairvoyance of the artist's attention. Weaving his periscope from the dark of inquiry, it is made vessel by faintly visible seashore. A painter is the world conscious that light belongs there. *Reductio ad absurdum*. Until a parallel ear forgets. A duplicate canvas engulfs silhouette with particle fire. Here a moment of sculpture tears off its crisscross veil. *Monadnock*, my mountain home: These rocks are thresholds that multiply *Praxiteles*. Where

dewdrops further elucidate the majority of tulips, root outweighs
flower head, twilight, *Promethea Sphinx*. In the absolute detail it
descends, a leaf's inverted vernacular. Out of which one ruptured
katydid proceeds, eternally convex, transverse, beneath a breath of
moonshine and meadow grass, a shadow's arrowy vehemence.

WHEN I LOOK

Moundnoek

*Those who simply climb to the peak of Monadnock have seen but little
of the mountain. I came not to look off from it, but to look at it.*

—Henry David Thoreau

Kate Thayer died in May 1891 after a long illness. “I take to [painting] all these dark months as to drink,” wrote her husband Abbott at this time. A subject to which he returned devoutly was Monadnock, the New Hampshire mountain he lived beside for many decades. Described as Thayer’s fetish and totem, he presented its crags and ledges in impressionistic blurs of snowy underbrush and finely detailed articulations of light intersecting its stately slopes.

But behind this pristine pastoral image lived the artist’s melancholy and dread. Kate’s sickness, complicated by a lung infection, produced in her husband a morbid fear of disease, which he sublimated into his studies of Monadnock. A repository for metaphors of health and vitality, they achieve a harmony of form and color. One can locate the peaceful solitude and clarity of mind the artist sought there. But, as if he’d attempted to purge them of an unknown contaminant, these angelic visions of the New England landscape often look like they’d been compulsively scrubbed, bleeding a barely suppressed desolation and vacancy.

“The whole question is how absolutely, how perfectly the artist sees this vision,” wrote Thayer. In the word *absolutely*, he suggests a kind of aesthetic purity (or self-purification) through art-making, one that might allow him to defy time and turn away death through artistic greatness. In the context of Thayer’s collected works—in

and outside of painting—this word also reveals his absolutist tendencies, portending his increasingly fanatical quest with regard to concealing coloration: He had to convert the world to his vision.

But Thayer's crusade to prove his theories only amplifies the psychic cracks visible in the Monadnock paintings. Assembling his views of the mountain as a metaphorical bulwark against life's uncertainties, he constructed line by line a transcendent figure that might absolve him of his earthly trembling, colonizing its image with denial battling fear and grief. However placid the mountain appears in his work, however possessed of Arcadian majesty it might have seemed from his neighboring New Hampshire home, Thayer's paintings foreshadow a growing struggle between representation and reality reflected prismatically through his steadily declining sense of self.

a dawn
no Hylodes dreams
a yes or no

has of brightness

(the sun)

(the sun)
a sparrow

I now remember

an acre of

cheek bones
imparting to

leaves, a husk
a passing thought

of the ravine—

robins everywhere—
don't answer

hands now

have a citizen

blue may be true
blue, viewed scarlet

the stable
become fluid—

and the songorous
next morning

beyond this. I
extends continuous

bright across its searching

A MOUNTAIN IN SEVERAL BRUSHSTROKES

Empty space composes

ghostwhitedawn.

Ghostwhitedawn

paints blue-green valley,

confusing as it arranges

the figure-ground relationship.

Place is a process by

which self becomes

metaphor for the relating

of self to

no known address.

Is this “I” as ecological

defect?

I could describe
the world as a mountain
of trouble in every direction.

Then description
becomes mountainous,
a phrase obscuring the tangle
of light at eye level.

But if the present is
a landscape changed by
my looking at it,
I've got nowhere to
go to watch its
hurried metonym
dissolve painterly
affection.

What I lose myself to

the mind chooses,

mystical infrastructure

from the blame

of ruin. A root as red

rootless red as buries night

in its never-flowering suggestion.

Wide as apparition,

dense as spruce.

Letter to - Butterflies - (Doubtful?)



no. 1.



The whole of the
spot in the
midst of the black
tip retains, of course,
its contour.



I simply mean that
these patterns, here, that
nowhere extend to the
border are the only ones

that no background can
obliterate by coalescence, as black does the
black tip of the no 1. and would do for the

demodocus if I gave the time to
repeat him on a black ground -

I send you this whole
mass rather than wait
in hope to pull it
together

I have made two more marvellous bird-skin landscapes
one that represents a Himalaya mountain gorge
and which is all made of the ground-out skin of a quail
pheasant.

PHOTOGRAPH OF ABBOTT HANDERSON THAYER'S
PORTRAIT OF KATE THAYER, 1888-89

undressing

hyacinth

a little shadow

breaches—

roots turned up—

black earth virgin's bower

just look—

mind nature posture absence

perceiving

eyes true form—

likeness collapsing

representation

with its pathology

were she visible

only image is visible—

the downward glance

it seems such an indignity

her *changed face*

it is not the woman but

imagines her with death

white dress—

between expression and

the instant it portrays

as beauty becomes
what it sees shadows

right arm in white
water of sleeve—

no shore where she is

FEATHER FRAGMENTS FROM LETTER

“I came not to look off

from it, but to look at it,”

said Thoreau after

climbing Monadnock.

It isn’t seeing but having

seen that opens perspective.

This opening doubles

back on what’s perceived,

the threat under which I

appear dissolve deceive etc . . .

Does this mean that having

seen one shouldn't look?

What's the difference between

gaping openly and glaringly

obtuse? The difference between

descending that mountain and

staring down its circular path.

If I paint what I am,

not what I see—

image is blindness;

every glance

becomes a mountain.

If I limn its likeness,

do I look at it only insofar

as it completes an idea of

itself—an idea that once

out of view is painted out

of existence? Till painting

becomes an image addressed

to its absence. Till this absence

becomes my own.

CIRCADIAN INFERENCE

clouded

clotted

cloaked

spirality—I

take my place

in blue est

dusk to

si ng

to—

is depiction

breach or fever

map or destination?—

in pitchblack

simulacra's

parts unknown

my voyage

becomes

not pattern

or detour

not context

or essay

not pore

or border

or pastime

or retreat

but an inward

migration

full of its

effects

LONGWINGEDSEA

In November 1915, Abbott Thayer traveled from Monadnock to Liverpool, England. With the help of artist-friend John Singer Sargent, he secured a meeting with British officials. Thayer hoped to convince the War Office to adopt changes to the field uniform based on his theories, but recent letters from Sargent suggested this was impossible. The artist spent his trip showing his ideas to professors and other naturalists and avoided the War Office. Internalizing the devastation he found, Thayer went into a frenzy. While Sargent made Thayer's case to officials, Thayer visited his friends the Whelpleys in Oxford, traveling together to London. Alarmed by the artist's condition, the Whelpleys devoted themselves to his care. This didn't prevent Thayer's abrupt departure for Glasgow, however, and a meeting with two prominent zoologists—a frantic trip that produced a letter to the Whelpleys in which he makes the strange declaration of “Total heavenly triumph,” a line prompting a visit from Scotland Yard.

Now in wild flight across war-torn Britain, Thayer fell under the swing of “the Abbott pendulum,” as he called it—a cycle of mania and depression eliminating sense and self. After a brief stay in Glasgow, Thayer departed again, this time for America, leaving his colleague Sargent without a word. He'd left behind only a suitcase. Expecting to find detailed plans for the implementation of Thayer's

designs, Sargent opened the suitcase at a meeting with British officials only to discover a few drawings and an old Norfolk jacket with rags pinned to it.

This jettisoned jacket had belonged to the late William James. William James Jr., Thayer's student, gave it to the artist on his father's death. James Sr. famously observed, "a man's vision is the great fact about him." It's possible to imagine Thayer wrapped in the philosopher's coat aboard a storm-gray ocean liner. In certain moments, he was known to refer to himself in the third person. One wonders if this was done in silent acknowledgment of the phantasmic forces of his delusions emitting a kind of perceptual twin that followed him across the world. Watching dawn compose the Atlantic in emergencies of white, red, and blue, the sun must've seemed a double agent bearing the dark conspiracy of the artist's soul.

of paper - Look for
happy - it's not
by this
Sullivan - the
power -
which is
the right

TRANSPARENT PROTESTS

A sunflower is a century.

A shadow its country.

A season is a verdict.

A valley an oath.

Who has described it—

twilight's dream

impoverishing the mind's?

My landscape died of winter.

My landscape died

where redleaves

eat through snow.

It was an insect and a fable.

It was a fever and a place.

It tightened its hate into a sunflower

and became a man.

His tangled limbs
were homily.

His path drowned
in wildflowers.

Every day the sun crawls
into his mouth
and bares its teeth.

It loves the quartermoon in May.

It swallows noonlight,
tastes the green of labor,
the gray of industry.

The first money was leather.
It was born and died.

It had a name,
a home, a face.

Even money had
a mother and father.

Its goodeye was a dream.
Its blindeye a totem.

Every day it buried
time's decrepit image in its own.

Every day I paint a sunflower without eyes.

I paint its shadow;
I leave it where I please.

I leave it in my canvas;

It loves dusk's falling forms.

It loves the painter's despair—
which is the inside of light.

It loves the robin's death—

which is a sleep
of thorn and bramble.

When the artist sees his shadow
in the grass,
he thinks the sun
is dead.

When he finds a deadbird
in a ditch,
he digs a graveyard
with each brushstroke:

First there was the sunflower I pretended to ignore.

Then there was the sunflower I pretended to see.

The sunflower digs the ground.
It leaves the body.

It grows from cadence calls,
which lead the tongue
from silence
to its vanishing.

OCCIPITAL

see these greens
pressed tight
between the dead
leaf scarlet
drinks you in
dark of wing
eyes from the ground^{up}
first winter then
unanswerable yel-
low throat
the whole bare
American body
eats twilight
from its sparrowed seed



TRANSPARENT PROTESTS

a hard wind

blows in the

boughs;

the

sun

is

the

flower

of my dreams;

that sun

of

sudden

inscape;

is day its deep migration?

night is

fall-

ing fast;

I push away

from the sun;

I see only

the sun;

light-

filled

canvas

barb-

ed wire

in wild iris;

“I want none

of this

violence”

the sun says

and the

people say,

“but the sun is also a child of day”—

blackwillow

peering

into space—

it hides it gleams

like a moon’s

white wake;

cracking branch

arterial plain

of matter—

the sun;

my father was

a sparrow

my field is bare—

on the bodies

of the dead

it is opened

like a door—

I can't get rid of

it by looking;

I can't tell it from

a ringing in my ears;

“no man has ever died in America”

the sun says—

when I speak I fear it;

when I'm frightened I cannot speak;

beyond the reach of words,

free of form and color;

if the sun were

a man I'd kill him;

if the sun were

a soldier I'd turn and shoot;

unwilling sun

deluged sun

my brother was

a tree

a blue-eyed

grass the temperature of the leaves

the blacksnake

the sun

I had lost sight

of, or never perceived;

if a tree is in

the way it's cut down;

if a man is in

the way he's the sun;

the clouds are executioners;

yes my speech

is strange—

the fact is

I'm a mystic—

so I go along

like nothing's happened—

the wind raves;

the sky is filled

with mute thunder—

I've prowled its

full existence—

my breath stars

the darkness;

a gaping figure

storms my field

of vision;

the sun breaks

like a leaf

CARNIVOROUS VERISIMILITUDES

Looking to the sight,
I am lost.

Folded over dogday
cicada nighthawk sun-
fleck, an instant split
within the lark.

In the rhizomatic
motion of flight,
crown and nape

are paradox—
vivid dislocations
the color of time.

Which is doubled,
a palimpsest,
and twice obliterated.

Have I begun to see?

Or perceived that nothing,
pulverized in a moment
crossed with sea
and fate.

Through it, I sift and seed
and seed and sift.

My canvas is planted
in its composition.

A veiled route trapped
in the black mirror
of representation.

Under the machine-
like utterance of dusk,

a glance throws
it back
against
its origin.

Is daylight
its philosophy
or nature?

Does it reinscribe
the frame?

Or has
it coalesced,
flower and seed,

around chronologies
of verge
and surface?

Doubling back through
life's dissolving
greenery,
I gather in aesthetic
consequence.

Is what's rendered
growth or sediment?

Trespass, graft, or theft.

Within the image,
a figure neither
ground nor disappearance.

When I face it,
have I turned away?

When I give it form,
I glimpse the idea
of the present as
it approaches at the
speed of vision
the fact of
its having been.

So the moment works
backward to itself.

And in a drift of
thought and weather,
it dreams through paper
moon and clouded ridge.

RED BIRD

I shall mother
(gun and ammunition)

the sun the whole

self floods:

2 beautiful finches

1 yellow warbler

[*moon moon moon*]

the most perfect of deaths

concave in its fraternity

NOTES

“Fugitive Depth”: The phrase “for what is looking” (page 16) is borrowed from Susan Howe’s *Singularities*. “Burst like a stream / making a world how large do you think it is / and how far?” (page 17) is excerpted from John Cage’s *M*, from the work “Song.”

“Photograph of Abbott Handerson Thayer’s *Portrait of Kate Thayer*, 1888–89”: The words “it seems such an indignity” and “changed face” (page 35) are from Abbott Thayer’s letters to Joe Evans, 1891.

“[In November 1915, Abbott Thayer traveled from Monadnock . . .]”: The quote “a man’s vision is the great fact about him” (page 47) is from William James’s *A Pluralistic Universe*.

*

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